

**I want to feel the Authenticity:
How the impression of authenticity revealed
in the performances of *American Idol***

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ABSTRACT: Authenticity is widely acknowledged as being a form of social, subjective and cultural delivery between performers and audiences. As stated by McCarthy, authenticity means “to feel *something* with honesty, integrity, and vitality and to express in one’s life the truth of one’s personal insights and discoveries.” As a spectator of the television series *American Idol*, one may focus on the talents of the contestants. However, the emotional drama on display revealed to us by these supposedly ordinary Americans is also a major point of attraction. The contestants’ emotional expression affects the way we as spectator vote. Viewers’ interest in the series hinges upon the perceived authenticity of the contestants, the judgment of which operates within a complex network of musical, cultural and economical conditions. This paper examines how the notion of authenticity can be said to manifest in *American Idol* by using several of the popular contestants as case studies. In *American Idol*, this sense of authenticity was conveyed through contestants’ performances and stage personalities. In the past two seasons, the champions Kris Allen and Lee DeWyze both displayed a humble and approachable personality; their performances were down-to-earth and conveyed a sense of being true to oneself. On the other hand, season eight runner-up Adam Lambert is known for his theatrical style, yet his most memorable performances were not those with glamorous dance routine or virtuosic vocal, but those with acoustic instruments and clean outfits. This paper argues that the popular television series is a classic manifestation of staged and performative authenticity. This paper reaffirms and explicates Barker and Taylor’s claim that *American Idol* “emphasizes the idea of the performance expressing the artist’s true self.”

KEY WORDS: authenticity, American Idol

Introduction

Authenticity is a growing topic in contemporary culture. Alexis Franzese (2009) stated that people, in the result of demands and expectations in contemporary culture, yearn to “feel true to one’s self” (p.87). After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, audiences as spectators has a “seismic shift in terms of construction and understanding of fantasy” (Smith, 2005, p.60), because the feeling of “it would never happen to me” in watching fiction has lost. As Rodney’s citation of Slavoj Zizek, “the fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality” (2005, p.38). Mark Andrejevic (2004) also discussed that people, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, “were no more duped by the promise of access to an unmediated spectacle than the self-consciously savvy pundits” (p.4), and they want something “real” rather than “fictional” (p.8). In this sense, they started to build a world that contains more in “real”. Baudrillard has argued that the media are no longer distinguishable from everyday life; they generate and present events as spectacles (Lockwood, 2005, p.78). Baudrillard’s concept of simulation illustrated people developed the notion and ideology of real and they were introduced significant modification to produce and reproduce a “real world” (Gane, 2000, p.34).

Van Leeuwen (2003) has argued that the meaning of authenticity is diverse. Authenticity could mean something is “genuine”, something is represented just like the original or something is authorized (Hill, p.74). Lionel Trilling (1972) defined authenticity as a term closely related to sincerity (p.11-12). On one hand, the practice of authenticity could be partly understood with something “true” and “real”, which is

a concept containing individual's inner emotion. On the other hand, the value of authenticity is without a universal agreement (Franzese, 2009, p.90).

McCarthy (2009) stated that "feelings and emotions are keys for unlocking who I am, my authenticity, how I perceive and how I discover my 'real self'" (p.241). The idea of presenting the self as authenticity is also raised by Jacob Golomb, stating authenticity is a crazy notion of chasing our own true selves (1995, p.5).

Geoff King (2005) discussed that the impressions of the "real" or the "authentic" are valued as forms of media spectacle in a number of contemporary media forms (p.13). He also stated that "reality" television offers the spectacle of the "real" self (p.13), where audiences can be offered an "escape into reality" (Andrejevic, 2004, p.8). This is one of reasons why reality TV dominates television rapidly in the decade.

Reality TV is a genre of television program that labeled "reality". There have several definitions of what Reality TV is, including: "the type of show based on ordinary people with 'real emotion'" (Holmes, 2004, p113), "a broad title for unscripted show that involve non-actors" (Huff, 2006) and "a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programs about real people" (Hill, 2005, p.2). The claims of authenticity are manifested in reality shows in which Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (2009) stated that "authentic" is the primary distinction of reality TV from fictional television (p.5). Annette Hill (2005) also stated that the performance of non-professional actors in reality shows often frames the discussion of authenticity (p.57). However, Reality TV is not classified as "real or not", but as "the level of realness", since the shows themselves are manipulated (Kavka, 2005, p.94). Kavka

(2005) suggested that “the term ‘reality’ need not be limited to palpable or documentable experience, but must increasingly be thought in terms of techniques of documentation which produce a sense of immediacy” (p.95). Taking these techniques of producing “reality”, audiences as the spectators can still receive the impression of realness and authenticity from the shows.

American Idol

American Idol is a show with the claims of authenticity. Not only is the concept of the “real content” displayed in this reality show, but also the self-expression in music is manifested. Just as Fetterley (2007) stated, the topic of authenticity is quite prevalent in popular music studies (p.3), for the reason that authentic meaning in music was invested in by creators and audiences (Tomlinson, 1988, p.115), also, music carries past experience that can be paired and associated (DeNora, 2006, p.143). Although *American Idol* is a commercial television program, the contestants in this show are all singing live. The live performance, unlike record, provides a face-to-face connection to audiences to reveal artists’ personality, which is the impression of “real self”. In the past two seasons, the champions Kris Allen and Lee DeWyze both displayed a humble and approachable personality; their performances were down-to-earth and conveyed a sense of “being true to oneself”. On the other hand, *Season eight* runner-up Adam Lambert is known for his theatrical style, yet his most memorable performances were not those with glamorous dance routine or virtuosic vocal, but those with acoustic instruments and clean outfits. The presentation of

authenticity is a vital element for contestants to succeed in this show. Judge Simon Cowell has emphasized repeatedly that contestants need to express themselves in the songs. Cowell's words seems to imply that having a great voice is not to be a necessity comparing to having a unique personality or authentic identity in *American Idol* (Bell, 2010, p.129).

Before Simon Fuller and Simon Cowell launched *American Idol* on FOX, the original version, called *Pop Idol*, aired in Britain successfully. More than 10,000 people applied to audition for *Pop Idol* in 2001 and the first season winner, Will Young, sold 2 million records with his first release.

Based on the performance, Fuller and Cowell decided to bring the show to the United States, where at that time, 2002, reality television was just taking off (Huff, 2006, p.123). After pitching the show to a couple of networks, *American Idol* then launched on FOX in June 2002. As the spin-off of *Pop Idol*, *American Idol* contains a number of similar features including ordinary people contesting and depends on audience voting for its selection of a winner.

The goal of *American Idol* is to seek great talented singers in United States, and through the show, turns them into professional singers. The show consists of four major stages: nation-wide audition, "Hollywood week", semi-finals and the finals. Judges in the show have the right to decide which contestants can advance to the next round on the first two stages and give critiques of the contestant's performances in order to guide voters on the last two stages. They play vital roles in determining contestants before semi-finals. After that, audiences decide the show's outcomes via

voting by phones or text messaging. The winner of *American Idol* can be signed by major record company and release solo album.

American Idol received positive feedback in the past nine years. It is one of the highest-rated TV shows in the history of television. Kotarba and Vannini (2008) concluded vividly that “the popularity of *American Idol* is the stuff that TV producers’ dreams are made of” (p.83). The long life of the show is depicted in Table 1, showing that it is still dominant in television:

Table 1: Rankings of *American Idol* Final Performances and Season Finale¹

Season	Date	Viewers (in millions)	Rank
1 st	Final Performances: Sept. 3, 2002	18.69	#30
	Season Finale: Sept. 4, 2002	22.77	#25
2 nd	Final Performances: May 20, 2003	25.67	#5
	Season Finale: May 21, 2003	38.00	#3
3 rd	Final Performances: May 25, 2004	25.13	#2
	Season Finale: May 26, 2004	28.84	#3
4 th	Final Performances: May 24, 2005	28.05	#1
	Season Finale: May 25, 2005	30.27	#3
5 th	Final Performances: May 23, 2006	31.78	#1
	Season Finale: May 24, 2006	36.38	#1
6 th	Final Performances: May 22, 2007	25.33	#2
	Season Finale: May 23, 2007	30.74	#1
7 th	Final Performances: May 20, 2008	27.06	#1
	Season Finale: May 21, 2008	31.66	#2
8 th	Final Performances: May 19, 2009	23.82	#2

¹ Note: Seasonal rankings are based on average total viewers per episode of *American Idol* on FOX. (Wikipedia.com, 2010)

	Season Finale: May 20, 2009	28.84	#1
9 th	Final Performances: May 25, 2010	20.07	#1
	Season Finale: May 26, 2010	24.22	#2

Authenticity and Identification in American Idol

As mentioned above, *American Idol* is a reality show containing the impression of authenticity. Bell (2010) also situated that the idea of identity and authenticity are highly prized in the *Idol* environment (p.123). Indeed, under the circumstance of popular music industry, *American Idol* is considered to be commercial (Barker & Taylor). However, the goal of finding appropriate recording artists is based on finding the contestants who truly know who they are (Bell, 2010, p.129). In this sense, highly identified to the music genre and what kind of personality the contestants have are the crucial elements in *Idol*.

Identification is another category in the claims of authenticity. McCarthy stated “Identification suggests that some of these collective happenings...are dramas of finding and losing, of seeking forms of self-validation and authenticity through emphatic experiences” (p.249). In *American Idol*, identification often is often related to emotional involvement. Cohen (2001) defined that viewers would imagine themselves being in the shoes of the performers (p.250). This states that viewers could be transported into the thoughts, feelings, and the reality of the characters (p.246). According to Cohen, the viewer with identification is removed from sheer spectatorship and is brought into the world of mediated reality. This is due to the audiences’ perceived similarity to the characters (Ho, 2007). Bringing this concept,

audiences of *American Idol* would have the identification to the contestants' performances and thereby receive the impression of authenticity, because that group of people "just like us" (Andrejevic) and "we are just like them".

Authenticity in Music

In a long period, "the quest for authenticity has been a dominant factor in musical taste" (Barker & Taylor, 2007, viiii). In popular music studies, authenticity is widely used for "social", "subjective" and "cultural" delivery (Fornäs, 1994) between performers and listeners. Fetterley (2007) illustrated the notion of authenticity in his doctoral dissertation:

Claims of authenticity-whether they are posited by artists, the media or listeners-are situated within certain expectations of genre, identity, and social and historical context. Authenticity is subsequently defined by the degree to which an artist is perceived to have fulfilled or subverted these expectations (p.3).

Kotarba (2009) further illustrated the claim of authenticity in music is a feature as much as the quality and beauty in music. He stated that "the popular music industry itself is particularly concerned with marketing and product definition—essential components of the construction of authenticity in all styles of popular music" (p.153). When people say the music or performance is authentic, according to Barker and Taylor (2007), they may refer to representational authenticity such as cultural authenticity or personal authenticity (x).

The prominent idea of making the music "real" is presented through the singers/songwriters' experience (Brackett, 1995, p.14). When the singers are performing their own songs, they may tell the audiences their own lives (Barker, 2007,

p.170), but even the singers are singing someone else's songs, it is still possible to make the song the singer's own and deliver the singer's experience and emotion just as Kurt Cobain did to Bill Monroe's "In the Pines", also known as "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" (see Barker & Taylor, 2007). Tia DeNora in her article *Music and Self-identity* demonstrated that music carry memory (2006, p.144). In music, past memories would be evoked, which strong emotional self-identity could be elicited from lyrics of particular songs in which the "me in music" is identified (p.145). The listeners, according to Fornäs (1994), are playing the roles that their experience of the emotional involvement determined whether the music have authenticity and can be identified. Fetterley (2007) cited Allen Moore's senses that authenticity can be conveyed from different "persons". The experience of the performers, the life of the audiences/listeners, or the "third person" could be the main character of the notion of authenticity in music.

Besides, music performance is also a platform of the claims of authenticity. Will Crutchfield is one of the scholars concerned with the idea of "authentic" performance. He believed that what an "authentic" performance contains is the performer's ability to create a new way of performing instead of following the "correct" way that used to be. Furthermore, using acoustic instruments in music performance present the impression of authenticity. This is the reason why *MTV Unplugged* was emerged. The show where audiences could watch artists performed without adulteration (Barker & Taylor, 2007, p.23). Widely use of certain techniques could also improve the notion of authenticity in performance, for instance, the idea of sincerity and autobiography and

using traditional instruments and singing old songs (Barker & Taylor, 2007, x).

Controversy-is it authentic?

Although *American Idol* is a singing competition under the genre of “reality” TV, former literatures were conflicted to whether this “reality” could equal to the term “real”. Murray and Ouellette (2009) stated that reality TV paradoxically hinged on audiences’ awareness that what audiences were watching was constructed and fictional (p.7). Chris Rojek (2007) also raised the same issue. He believed that because people are aware of the existence of the cameras, which means no matter how “comfortable” they feel in front of the cameras, people in the show would act differently comparing with “real” life. Also, they know that performing the fake instead of presenting real-self can attract audiences, and in most of the programs, to increase votes (p.14). On the other hand, TV producers control the impression of “real” so that what looks “real” to us could be fabricated. According to Couldry (2009), producers would deliberately cut some certain scenes in order to mold an individual’s certain personality, even though the individual is not that kind of person (p.85-86).

Most of the perspectives above are based on reality-documentary shows such as *Survivors* and *Big Brother* in which contain the elements of “life under surveillance” and “not-live-show”. *American Idol*, however, seems less reality-TV-like comparing to shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivors* because it emphasizes on-stage singing rather than backstage life of the contestants. Furthermore, it is a live show (excluded

auditions and “Hollywood” rounds), which means less faking tricks, such as cutting the scenes, could be applied. Hill cited the idea from Van Leeuwen that ordinary people in reality program could be perceived as authentic if they are “though to be true to the essence of something, to a revealed truth, a deeply held sentiment” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p.74). The live performances in *American Idol* at least protect the idea of delivering the revealed truth on the first hand with less manufacturing. Furthermore, the claims of authenticity in music performance can be applied in this singing competition.

As discussed, Barker and Taylor argued that *American Idol* contains too many commercial elements which make the show less authentic. The goal of creating successful pop stars and records seems to treat the attempt of success more important than actual music (2002, p.323). However, they fail to concern that *American Idol*, as a platform of singing songs live, is another way of presenting authenticity. Here is the hypothesis of this paper:

Contestants in *American Idol* manifest the impression of authenticity during the show in their performance and recorded songs.

Reality TV contains the idea of bringing the “real and true” content to the audiences. The involvement of ordinary people also carries the claims of authenticity to the audiences. This is a firm connection in the discussion between the notion of authenticity and reality TV. Since, *American Idol* is one of the most successful and representative reality shows, it is an appropriate example in reflecting the claims of

authenticity. Audiences watching the show not only focus on the talent of the contestants, but also the emotion and claims of authenticity presented from the contestants, which is also a key factor for contestants to succeed.

Methodology

The research of authenticity focuses on several popular contestants in *American Idol* by decoding the themes and information in visual and verbal data. As Wimmer and Dominick stated, qualitative analysis is a research method that relies mainly on the analysis of visual data (observations) and verbal data (words) (2006, p.113). In order to analyze the manifest of authenticity in the performance, qualitative research method is an appropriate method in assessing and evaluating the meanings of the texts. To examine the claims of authenticity, thematic analysis, a primary qualitative research method is applied. This method, according to Van Manen (1990), is the “method to recover the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (p.78).

To conduct the research, the analysis of the popular contestants would be based on the performance on the semi-finals and the finals, because these two rounds are live show, and audiences’ voting participation is applied. For indicating each episode, the format would be (S*E*). For example, if the text analyzed is in *Season 8* Episode 14, the writing would be (S8E14).

Choosing the method of thematic analysis in order to answer the research questions, codes and themes will be collected from *American Idol*. The research

would first focus on the personality of some contestants that reveals to the audiences to see whether their performances presenting their personalities received positive comments from the judges and helped them winning the votes. The research then concentrates on the instrument playing as the idea of manifesting authenticity in Kris Allen and Lee DeWyze, the champions of the past two seasons. After that, the paper will take a close view on the changing of the lyrics to make the song the contestants' own as the way to present authenticity.

Finding

Personality, authenticity and connection

In *American Idol*, successfully connecting with audiences or judges is a key element to survive for the contestants. The way to evoke this connect is multiple. The first way is the impression of personality with true-self.

In the latest two seasons of *American Idol*, the spectacle of "humbleness" is definitely a "champion" quality. *Season 8* winner Kris Allen and *Season 9* winner Lee DeWyze are the contestants who show the boy-next-door characteristics. This quality helped them to build an approachable connection to the audiences. Also, their impression of humbleness is a claim of authenticity that could be presented in the performance.

Kris Allen is an underestimated contestant at the beginning of *Season 8*. The producers did not even give him a complete screen in the audition, but when he was in semi-finals, his special humbleness was established and revealed. The recap tape

showed him playing guitar in the “Hollywood week” and he said “Simon was worry about my confidence, and today, I am gonna show him I do have confidence and that I can do this song to the best of my ability” (S8E14). Paula Abdul and Simon Cowell both praised his performance saying that he showed his confidence and personality.

In the finals, his “personality/identity” is the key element for audiences to remember him and vote for him. His approachable personality and the idea of “keeping the real-self” assisted him to receive lauds from the judges week by week, such as Abdul saying “genuine” (S8E27), Jackson saying “you know who you are” (S8E31, S8E39) and Cowell saying “concentrating on yourself” (S8E21). This type of “stick-to-the-self” depict assisted him to take the title. It revealed apparently when DioGuardi phrased Allen in the final performance that “you’ve been true to you from day one and you have not waiver” (S8E39).

As the champion in *Season 9*, Lee DeWyze is also a no-name at the very beginning, but his emotional and humble personality revealed in the semi-finals. In the recap type showing in the first week of semi-finals, He stated that he hoped to show his love of music and his personality on the stage. The performance did receive a positive feedback from Simon Cowell. Noticeably, when Cowell gave him the positive comments, audiences can see DeWyze’s eyes got wet. When host Ryan Seacrest asked him the feeling on the stage, he said “I don’t want to lose this feeling ever again” (S9E14). The emotional expression received both compassion and applause from the live audiences. DioGuardi judged DeWyze’s “The Boxer” and “Everybody Hurts” individually in the final week as “a meaningful song that tells

your story. So for that, it is very believable and I like you're connected to it" and "you're emotionally accessible that I can feel every word you sing and you're telling a story" (S9E42). When the camera gave DeWyze a close shot, we can see the emotion on his face with timid smile. The emotional, humble personality DeWyze has presented not only shows what kind of person he is but also connects to the audiences.

Authenticity is not only appropriately imprinted with the humble contestants, but also found in contestant with other style. *Season 8* runner-up Adam Lambert is known for his theatrical style, yet his most memorable performances were not those with glamorous dance routine or virtuosic vocal, but those with acoustic instruments and clean outfits. In S8E31, he rearranged the classic disco song "If I Can't Have You" into a slow tempo love song. DioGuardi approved that "it is the most memorable performance...it is just the emotion, the way you connected is inspiring" (S8E31).

Instrument playing

Traditional music instrument using in live performance is another method of building authenticity and invoking connection, as Barker and Taylor indicated. In *American Idol*, contestants using music instruments in their performance is a new rule started in *Season 7* (Starr, 2007, Para. 2). This change is first considered to be an opportunity to depict other talent from contestants.

Both Kris Allen and Lee DeWyze love to play instrument in performance. In the 11 weeks, 14 performances of the finals, Allen has used acoustic guitar 5 times and used keyboard/piano 3 times. A great number of instrument using identified him not

only as a singer/song-writer type but also as a clean and true performer. When Allen took his guitar back in the first week of the final, both Abdul and DioGuardi praised his performance with guitar, saying “that’s what you should be doing is playing and singing” (S8E19).

Season 9 winner Lee DeWyze is also a singer/songwriter type. Just as Allen, in the 11 weeks, 14 performances in the finals, DeWyze used acoustic guitar 11 times. He expressed that sing with guitar is in his comfort zone: “being able to play with guitar...is special for me, because I got the chance to show the judges what exactly I do” (S9E14).

Authenticity in lyrics

Just as former scholars indicated, the notion of authenticity in music closely links to experience and memory (Brackett, p14, 1995; DeNora, in Bennett, Shank & Toyne, p144, 2006). Although the songs contestants can sing on the stage are not originally composed by them, they can still put their experience and make the songs their own by changing lyrics, which is another way of building authenticity and invoking connection.

Brooke White reached the 5th-place in *Season 7*. Not only is she a beautiful, blonde and attractive girl, but she is also one of the most authentic contestants in the show (Bell, p209, 2009). In her first Top 5 performance, she changed the lyrics of Neil Diamond’s “I Am...I Said”, putting “I’m Arizona born and raised” in replace to the original “I’m New York born and raised”. Paula Abdul judged that “it is how you

connect to the audiences. Everyone loves who you are” (S7E35). The same situation happens in Adam Lambert. As a homosexual contestant, he deliberately changed lyrics to fit his sexual identity. In his studio version of Smokey Robinson’s “Track of My Tears”, he changed all the “she/her” into “they/somebody”. Also, in his studio version of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love”, he changed the word “woman” into “baby”. The way he blurs the sexual identity in the lyrics is a way of highlighting his own identity.

Apart from White and Lambert, there have other contestants who changed the lyrics to highlight their own experience and identity. *Season 9* 5th-place contestant Aaron Kelly, who is 17 years old, also changed the some lyrics of the love song “You’ve Got a Way” from “make love” to “show love” to fit his personal love to his mom. DioGuardi appreciated the change of the lyrics, saying “it was like you really felt those words...it is sweet”, and Cowell approved the performance comparing to Kelly’s former performances that “for the first time, it felt sincere, it felt believable and once again, it doesn’t feel like you’re singing somebody else’s song” (S9E34).

Analysis and Conclusion

Through this research, the claims of authenticity in *American Idol* have been discussed. The results display that contestants’ performances in the show, to some extent, present the impression of authenticity.

The champions in the past two seasons, Kris Allen and Lee DeWyze, show the authentic personality during the competition to the audiences. Their performances

were always complimented by the judges as authentic and genuine. This refers to and matches the theory Bell (2010) stated that the idea of identity and authenticity are highly prized in the *Idol* environment (p.123). This type of impression of authenticity also builds the connection to the audiences and propels audiences vote for them. In this sense, viewers, through watching the performances, could be transported into the thoughts, feelings, and the reality of the characters (Cohen, 2001, p.246). This fits the situation when Adam Lambert sang slow songs and won audiences' sense of identification. Lambert's super high notes in up-tempo songs may be exciting and theatrical, but what really imprinted to audiences is the identity of the "real-self". Lambert disclosed this identity explicitly in songs like "If I Can't Have You" and "Track of My Tears".

Although the show is made for commercial benefits, yet the producers highlight the practice of authenticity to enrich the identification of the show. In the recap tapes, contestants were encouraged to speak about their background and their desire in music. In live performances, the permission of using instruments not only reveals the versatility contestants have but also increases the change of presenting authenticity on stage as Barker and Taylor (2007) indicated. The use of instrument in live performance is considered to have more control to the song. Comparing to singing songs accompanied by other, singing with playing instrument can easily change and rearrange the song based on personal preferences and do not need to consider others capability. Furthermore, it allows improvisation during the performance, so it leaves more space to the performers.

American Idol allows contestants to rearrange the songs and change the lyrics. These permit contestants to make the songs their own, and easy to convey their personal emotion into the songs and performances. In Aaron Kelly's case, he changed "make love" to "show love" not only to avoid embarrassment for him as a 17 years old teenager, but also successfully "show his love" to his mom and received positive comments from the judges.

In conclusion, *American Idol* is the show combining commercialization and the impression of authenticity. On one side, we have to admit that the goal of this show is to make profits. Taken the fact of the huge profits the show received including the amount of viewers, the number of No. 1 records the winners made and the tickets sold on *American Idol* nation tour each year after the competition, the show itself is a perfect representation of commercialization. However, although the show is to search record artists, the process of making these artists contains the idea of authenticity. Since most of the contestants do not have professional performing training, what they perform on the live show would more or less convey their "real-self".

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